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Ontology of the Layer: A Post-Human Object

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"It is at work everywhere, functioning smoothly at times, at other times in fits and starts. It breathes, it heats, it eats. It shits and fucks. What a mistake to have ever said the id. Everywhere it is machines — real ones, not figurative ones: machines driving other machines, machines being driven by other machines, with all the necessary couplings and connections"

Gilles Deleuze, *Anti-oedipus: capitalism and schizophrenia*

What is a layer? A separator or something separated? Is there such a thing as a layer or is it a different concept, or rather object, depending on the discipline? There are two philosophical questions regarding the layer: *does it exist?* (ontology) and *what is it?* (metaphysics). What is strange is not the boundary, the border, or the separator: the layer is something else, as we shall see. It is the other. When there is dust on an object, our intuition is that there is "a layer of dust": that is, something that only exists in relation to something else, as an accumulation or as a parasite. Each layer, if it exists, is always a layer *of something* or, more precisely, a layer *on something*. Which is philosophically interesting fact: we identify the existence of an object, i.e. the layer, only through the existence of other objects on which it is based. Therefore the layer is something on something else, and what separates these two "somethings" is an abrupt change of structures: we know that what we observe is not continuous, but dis-continuous. And yet we still know nothing about the layer if not that it is technically a "relational object" that is unclassifiable within a standard ontology. It might rather be analysed (perhaps) within a dynamic ontology: that is, a philosophy that understands science and especially contemporary physics, for which every entity exists in relation to other entities. So, let's dare propose a first definition of layer.

Layer: object that always exists through the relation "on" or "above" something else.

This is still very little, too little. Layering seems to amount to placing things on other things. But what are we placing, if these things are not themselves independent? Are they born during the very act of being placed? Not quite: they first exist as X and then as X-Layer. For instance, the layer of dust was first simple dust and only later acquired the status of layer. Let's not speak in metaphors: observing the universe from a godlike viewpoint, indeed, everything can be seen as a layer of something else. Historical periods are layered and forms of life (including us humans) are layered within the Darwinian evolutionary paradigm. However, this path risks leading us to the false statement that everything is a layer. If a definition is meaningful even in its negative form it is because it differentiates itself from the rest. The history of the layer, provided it exists, does not interest me: what interests me is to understand what is a layer and what isn't.

According to Gilles Deleuze (1993) the fold, a concept not far from that of layer, is essentially the symbol of a porous, wrinkled, cavernous, always moving reality. The reality is therefore an endless swarm of small folds: a multiplicity that folds and unfolds, which we must also try to unfold through our ability of philosophical analysis. Deleuze's fold is almost a layer, but not quite: a fold can

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(partly) be separated from what it is a fold of, but a layer cannot. The layer is a resistance in the sense that binds its existence to that of other entities. That said, why is the layer interesting? My thesis is that the layer is the best object to look at if we want to understand something of that particular kind of ontology we call "relational" or, better, to understand the importance of the theory based on this ontology: the post-human theory.

Contrary to what is often said, relational ontology does not claim that there is nothing but relations, but rather that things only exist in relation to one another: such ontology works hand in hand with science. It questions all the classic ontological models of analytic matrix aiming at accounting for the world as an inventory of objects, so that reality is translated into the way we humans classify it.¹ However, the only possible ontology is the one identifying the bonds between objects that, in accordance with the most recent research on relativity, is able to understand that even very distant or different objects can influence one another. The layer as a primary example of this, being both tied and tying, proves the thesis that every object is a hybrid, and life forms are just a part of these objects. Then, a part of these life forms is made up of humans. The awareness that the human being, like a layer existing on something else, is a hybrid bond between animality and technology is what we call post-human theory (Caffo, Marchesini 2014). This human being is no longer defined within the limits of its anthropocentric predicates (language, mind, and so on) but is open to new cognitive dispositions produced by the encounter with otherness. The layer is the object *par excellence* that plays in favour of relational ontology: the relation is not identified by us but is pre-existing because everything is connected.

Therefore the layer is not only interesting in itself but also for what it stands for: it testifies that it is impossible to understand what we see if we do not understand what's behind the apparent surface. A layer is a unit of measurement: it can be internally homogeneous or it can comprise remarkable changes and alterations of its constituents (such constituents, not themselves reducible to the layer, are often the folds I mentioned above). Layering can be therefore thick or thin, and the thinner it is the more complex it is to understand the ties and relations between objects. Geologists say that one can measure the "thickness" of a layer: in other words, the distance measured perpendicularly between its upper and lower surfaces. Also, one can measure its "disposition", that is, its orientation in space with respect to the north and to the horizontal plane. The same principle holds in philosophy: the layer is the measure of the distance between points, spaces and coordinates. By means of layering we can understand a social, architectural, urban or biological phenomenon: through what is "on", i.e. the layer, we can understand what is underneath, submerged – it is what John Searle called "a brute fact" (Searle 1996), which would otherwise be obscure and hidden. The layer is often the surface of a hidden object, where the ability of the percipient amounts to a particular form of deconstruction: destratification. In other words, a kind of philosophical geology that makes it possible to understand what lies behind the appearances, because reality exists regardless of human hermeneutics (Ferraris 2015), but it is not what it seems to be to us (Caffo 2014).

Destratification: practical analysis of the distribution of the layers able to analyse and understand its genealogy and the ontology of what is underneath.

¹ This is Kant's transcendental fallacy and its consequences: cf. Ferraris 2014.

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It goes without saying: the ontology of the layer does not say anything about its possible uses, yet it is necessary. It is necessary to understand the object of the discourse and to undertake joint research on these issues without risking, as I fear, not agreeing on the basic meaning of the analysis. Stratification is not a linear process, the variables are many: time, space, possibility. Hybridization is the key to understanding stratification, where binary thinking is challenged by objects that cannot be fully defined in a self-centred way: the layer becomes the paradigm of the power of the concept of "relation", against any thought of identity and in favour of a theory of difference (Calarco 2011). Such relational way of thinking is multi-layered itself, resting on other ways of thinking and aware of being debtor and creditor of the complex mechanism we call knowledge. So can we speak of a philosophical stratigraphy? I think so: although research in this sense has just begun, it is crucial to lead other disciplines to distinguish a "layer" from other types of entities and objects.

I believe that in philosophy, just as in archaeology, one can identify a "law of superposition" (Hamblin 1978, p. 115) that, *mutatis mutandis*, goes like this: sedimented layers are deposited in a time sequence, with the oldest at the bottom and the youngest at the top. Assuming that existence resembles an archaeological stratification, i.e. a collection of landscapes of the past / present / future (to focus on the perceiver's limited perspective), one should seek the oldest deposit (primary objects) at the bottom of the sequence. This is a philosophically crucial phenomenon, because it means that an object cannot be older than its layers: think of the impact of such metaphysical law on politics, morals or architecture. Thinking the future, perhaps, starts here.

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